

WASHINGTON, D.C. In response to the Defense Department’s ongoing violation of a 1997 law, Congressman Sanford Bishop introduced the Healthy Troops Act of 2004; which, if enacted, would guarantee that all service members receive a clinical medical examination before and after deployment.

The legislation specifically addresses the ongoing violation of a 1997 congressional mandate (PL 105-85, 10 U.S.C. § 1074) that requires the Department of Defense (DoD) to perform pre- and post- deployment medical exams to determine both a service member’s fitness for combat and any health conditions that result from deployment. To comply with this mandate, the DoD is currently replacing a comprehensive medical exam with self-administered surveys.

“It is beyond irresponsible to base the health of our troops on their ability to self-diagnose. Not only is this an inaccurate way to record health status, it is an ineffective way to detect many conditions that do not present obvious symptoms,” said Congressman Bishop. “Yes, a medical exam will be more expensive than a written questionnaire, but we are asking these men and women to put their lives on the line. The least we can do is put our focus on their health.”

If enacted, Congressman Bishop’s legislation would specifically mandate that DoD provide a full hands-on pre and post deployment exam to consist of a survey followed by a personal examination that would include the collection of clinical data such as vital signs and blood samples. Currently medical reviews are required on an annual basis for active duty personnel; reservists under the age of 40 are reviewed every 5 years while those over the age of 40 are reviewed every other year. Specific standards for these reviews are often left to interpretation. There are instances in which reservists are simply required to certify in writing that they are “healthy.”

Additionally, the need for such a system was demonstrated after Operation Desert Storm, when veterans began complaining of symptoms later identified as “Gulf War Syndrome.” Without both pre- and post-war documentation it was impossible for veterans of the first Gulf War to prove that their deployment had in fact caused their symptoms. Without verification that symptoms were war-related, claims for medical compensation were denied.

Joining Congressman Bishop as original co-sponsors of the Healthy Troops Act are ranking Democratic members of the House Armed Services and Veteran’s Affairs Committees, Congressman Ike Skelton and Congressman Lane Evans as well as the Ranking minority members on the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Congressman Jack Murtha and the Military Construction Appropriations Subcommittee, Congressman Chet Edwards.